

Toward a Century of Health: The Wisdom for Leading a Long Life of Good Fortune and Benefit—Part 2 [of 4]

Changing Poison into Medicine—Leading a Life of Brilliant Achievement through “Faith for Transforming Karma”

Lecture presented by Kate Greco
SGI Canada Study Department

We will not be holding district study meetings in May, in order to offer our full support to the Women’s Group General Meetings. But we hope you will not miss the opportunity to study this month’s hope-filled essay that Sensei has provided for us.

As the title indicates – this month’s study is all about having the faith to transform even the most difficult karma – the karma of illness – into mission, which is another way of describing the process of “changing poison into medicine”. And Sensei discusses the dialogues that he participated in with two Canadian doctors from the University of Montreal – Dr. René Simard and Dr. Guy Bourgeault, that were published in the book, *On Being Human: Where Ethics, Medicine and Spirituality Converge*.

In last month’s study, we learned about the important distinction between “illness” and “the devil of illness”. As we know, none of us can avoid illness altogether. But when illness befalls us, we have to challenge the “devil of illness” – the feeling of despair that can be even more debilitating than the illness itself, because it can lead us to give up and lose the strength to go on living. In last month’s study, Sensei said:

We need to see this devilish aspect of illness for what it is and courageously combat it through the power of our Buddhist faith and practice. We must resolve not to be defeated by it. Through battling and triumphing over the devil of illness, we can reveal our Buddhahood.

Sensei assures us that our happiness is guaranteed, and at the very beginning of this month’s lecture he says,

Illness does not prevent us from fulfilling our mission in life. For we who chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and dedicate ourselves to kosen-rufu, illness can be a precious opportunity through which we come to shine with true radiance.

I am going to share a member's wonderful example of this in just a few minutes! Nichiren Daishonin was exiled on Sado Island for three years, where he was sick, and had very little food, yet he triumphed throughout, knowing that he was fulfilling his great mission. In a similar way, President Makiguchi spent over 500 days in a tiny jail cell, refusing to bow to the unjust persecution.

From this tiny cell, President Makiguchi wrote to his family that:

Our faith is the most important thing. The hardships we are undergoing now are small and inconsequential compared to those encountered by the Daishonin, so we should take them for granted and strengthen our faith more than ever. Enjoying vast and boundless benefits, we must not resent such present trials. You'll later find, as I know from past experience, that we will definitely change poison into medicine, just as the sutra and the Gosho teach.

Imagine having this kind of courage and confidence – even from his prison cell! The first Gosho passage is from On Curing Karmic disease, a letter given to Ota Jomyo. Sensei begins by quoting the six causes of illness as outlined by the great Chinese scholar, T'ien T'ai, and a little later on, he explains these causes in today's terms. For the sake of time, I will leave you to study this section on your own. Sensei emphasizes one sentence from this same Gosho, as follows:

On the one hand, knowing that you are in agony grieves me, but on the other, I am delighted. (WND-1, 631)

In this one sentence, the Daishonin is conveying his deep sympathy for Ota Jomyo's suffering, but at the same time, letting him know that this is an opportunity for him to transform his karma.

When we become ill, we have an opportunity to challenge ourselves to strengthen our faith, deepen our Buddhist practice and polish our lives. Sensei says,

When we base our struggle against illness on chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can firmly establish the eternally indestructible life state of Buddhahood and change poison into medicine without fail. That is why it is cause for "delight".

Sensei tells us that while respecting medical science, Buddhism focuses on having a correct understanding of illness and dealing with it in the best way so we may go on to lead better lives. And he reminds us of his four mottoes for health, as follows:

- 1 – Do an invigorating Gongyo
- 2 – Lead a balanced and productive lifestyle
- 3 – Contribute to the welfare of others
- 4 – Eat wisely.

Sensei adds that getting enough sleep and reducing stress to a minimum are also important. Easier said than done, right? But by using our faith and practice, we can recognize the “devil of illness” and bring forth the wisdom to live wisely, remembering that “Faith equals daily life”.

For us to change the “poison” of all suffering and hardship into “medicine” that deepens and enriches our lives, Sensei stresses the importance of remaining steadfast in faith. What does it mean to remain steadfast in faith? We need to sincerely chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, encourage others, and live our lives with a noble sense of mission. We can’t just chant out of habit. We need to chant with the power of a jet plane taking off, in order to break through the clouds and reach the clear blue skies beyond, where the sun of our Buddha nature shines.

When we get sick, we might think, “What did I do to deserve this? Or “Why is this happening to me?” If we can change this thinking to “This is my opportunity to change my karma!” “This is my noble mission!” It is at this moment that we can change poison into medicine.

This next Gosho quote was written to the wife of Ota Jomyo in “On Attaining Buddhahood in One’s Present Form.” Once again, you can read the entire passage in your *New Century*, but for today, we will discuss one section:

The “poison” in the above passage means the first two of the four noble truths, the truth that all existence is suffering and the truth that suffering is caused by selfish craving as well as the karmic cause and effect that confine living beings to the sufferings of birth and death. These are truly the poison to outdo all poisons. But through the extraordinary power of the character *myo*, or “wonderful,” this poison is changed into the understanding that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana, that earthly desires are enlightenment. This is the good medicine that can change poison into medicine, hence it is called good medicine. (WND-2, 585-86; “On Attaining Buddhahood in One’s Present Form”)

Sensei explains that it is Myoho-rence-kyo, the Mystic Law that makes it possible to reveal our Buddha nature even in the midst of suffering, and that the character *myo* of Myoho-rence-kyo represents the ultimate essence – the power to change poison into medicine. We are encouraged to recognize our earthly desires and sufferings for what they are, and to face them head on.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with the Daishonin's encouragement to Shijo Kingo in which he says: "Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life, and continue chanting Nam-myoho-rence kyo, no matter what happens." (WND-1, 681) This is the key to transforming our earthly desires and sufferings and establishing a state of happiness.

Sensei says that being ill does not change the inherent greatness, nobility and majesty of our lives.

I want to tell you about my friend Valerie McCall – Val has been practicing this Buddhism in Edmonton since she was a teenager. Val was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when she was in her twenties, and 8 years ago, when she was 50, her needs were such that she had to leave her condo and move in to a long term care facility. As you might imagine, she was the youngest person there, and found the age difference quite difficult – so she began chanting for a friend her age. Now, there are two women in her age range that she has become friends with there. Not too long ago, Val applied and was approved to receive the Cadillac of all wheelchairs – maybe you've seen them – they can go up and down and they can swivel – so you can talk with people at eye level. Val's friend had applied for a similar wheelchair, and was denied – so Val encouraged her to appeal the decision – and to chant... and her friend was successful in receiving her new wheelchair in just one month! Now Val, and two other women in the residence are chanting regularly. Val chants for the happiness of everyone who lives there.

Because of Covid, everyone sits alone at their table in the dining room, and they are restricted from going into one another's rooms. So, when one of the women asks Val if they can chant, in between courses in the dining room – they do! And everyone in the dining room gets to hear Nam myoho rene kyo. Val is described as someone who never complains! In spite of, or because of her MS, Val is able to create such tremendous value with her life, chanting and encouraging the people around her every day.

Val is a prime example of someone who is not defeated by "the devil of illness" and I hope that we can all be encouraged by her example!

As Sensei says, “There are people battling difficult-to-cure illnesses who use what time they have to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, impart courage to others, and live out their lives with a noble sense of mission. Through doing so, they are able to transform the meaning of illness.”

Thank you so much for listening to this month’s podcast. I hope it is a good supplement to this month’s study essay.

Let’s follow Sensei’s advice to “lead optimistic’ lives brimming with courage and take every challenge as an opportunity to fulfill our mission.”

On May 2 we will be holding our SGI Day and SGI Mother’s Day Special Commemorative Meetings. I hope you can attend the meeting in your area. In case you don’t know, we now have an online portal at sgicanada.org. Once you register, you can have access to your subscriptions online, and you can participate in making offerings at any time, but particularly to our May Special Kofu Fund. I hope you will join me in chanting to support our Women’s Group General Meetings through daimoku and inviting our friends!

Thanks!